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AN ILL-ADVISED CRITICISM OF *CYRANO DE BERGERAC*

BY A. G. H. SPIERS

Amid the faultfinding inevitably produced by the popularity of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, there is one form of attack against which university teachers should protest vigorously. This is an attack based upon little matters of historical documentation. It may be wise to point out inaccuracies as a warning to embryo specialists in investigation classes; it is useful, too, in literature courses, to study these inaccuracies as a commentary upon the way in which creative literature may be based upon history. But to make of these inaccuracies, in and of themselves, a condemnation of a bit of literary art, is a proof of narrowness and a serious professional mistake.

This mistake has been made by M. E. Magne. He made it originally in an article of the *Revue de France*; and this article drew from Rostand a letter which should have checked the ardor of his misplaced erudition. Unfortunately M. Magne did not take the hint. He developed from this article a little book¹ that has had at least two editions and in which it has pleased him, not only to repeat his fundamental mistake, but also to include certain errors in his own documentation which permit us to turn against him his own weapons.

Let us take a few examples. Magne suggests that Baro was a very insignificant figure in his day, and states that his plays "à part *la Clorise*, n'eurent point . . . les honneurs de l'impression." This second point is easily contradicted by a glance at Brunet who lists eight plays that were printed; and as for the first, its accuracy too may well be questioned. Without going as far as Mellier who speaks of Baro as "le littérateur et le poète dont la gloire, à l'époque où il vivait, aurait suffi à rendre illustres à la fois plusieurs hommes"²; we may say that Baro was certainly not a "nobody." He was supported by Richelieu, by the Duchesse de Chevreuse and by Mademoiselle. He wrote the latter portion of the immensely

¹ *Le Cyrano de l'Histoire* (les Erreurs de documentation de "Cyrano de Bergerac"); Deuxième édition, Paris, 1903.

² Etienne Mellier: *Balthazar Baro*. Valence, 1897; p. 60.

popular *Astrée*, the fourth part being composed on notes left by d'Urfé and the fifth independently. He was early received into the Academy and was one of the three men, the other two being Chapelain and Desmarests, appointed to examine the verses of the *Cid*. Somewhat later he became the "Procureur du Roi au Présidial de Valence" and, according to some, including Pellisson, became also, at one time, the "Trésorier de France" at Montpellier.³ Lastly, a fact which I give for what it may be worth, his publishers thought enough of him to reproduce his portrait in at least three different editions of the *Astrée*.

In speaking of Montfleury, Magne quotes the statement: "Il joua d'original dans *le Cid* et dans *les Horaces*." This quotation is no doubt taken from Lemazurier⁴; but Lemazurier's statement has long since been discredited. As a quotation from Scudéry indicates, it was not Montfleury but rather Mondory who created the rôle of Rodrigue.⁵

On page 25 Magne writes: "M. Rostand parle-t-il d'une gazette? Il oublie la date de sa fondation. Tel le *Mercur françois*, fondé en 1672, et dont Cyrano méprise la puissance en 1640." Not at all. Here it is the professional investigator, and not the literary artist, who is at fault. Magne confuses the gazette founded by Donneau de Visé in 1672, with the publication started by Jean Richer in 1605 and which, in 1640, was managed by Renaudot.⁶

Much of Magne's contempt for Rostand's play is based upon the fact that Rostand's first act represents a performance of Baro's *Clorise* as taking place in 1640. This, according to Magne, is "l'erreur principale sur laquelle vient se greffer une multitude de fautes." But what if this was not an error at all?

Magne points out that *la Clorise* was first played in 1631; and when Rostand explains that "nous sommes à un reprise de *Clorise*," he maintains that such a revival did not take place: that the play was not worth reviving and that the great production of other plays at that time would keep it off the stage. To this abstract argumentation, it is possible, however, to oppose certain probabilities that more than justify Rostand's assumption.

³ Mellier, *op. cit.*

⁴ Cf. Chappuzeau: *Le Théâtre françois*; Monval's edition, p. 115.

⁵ Grands Ecrivains, Corneille, III, p. 13.

⁶ Hatin: *Bibliographie de la presse*.

The question is somewhat complicated because the quarrel between Montfleury and Cyrano, that occurs in Rostand's first act, is usually reported as taking place at a performance of a play by Baro called *Cloreste* (and not *Clorise*).⁷ The fact seems to be, however, either that Baro wrote a play *Cloreste* (or *Cleoreste*) which was played but never printed,⁸ or else that a mistake on the part of the *Gazette* led to the belief that Baro had written such a play whereas, in reality, the performance to which the *Gazette* refers was merely a revival of the *Clorise*. This latter alternative has received much support. It is in accord with a supposition made by the Frères Parfait⁹; it would better explain the absence of printed copies; and I note that it is accepted by Mellier.¹⁰

Lacking, then, any adequate proof against the revival of *la Clorise* and having, on the contrary, good ground for belief that it may have been given in 1636 as well as in 1631, it is hard to see how any critic could censure Rostand for supposing that this play was again performed in 1640.

But, after all, it is not the points just made that are the most unfortunate features of Magne's volume. His mistake is more fundamental, and consists in nothing less than a misconception of the conditions governing the composition of a good play. Erudition is one thing; creation is another. The playwright has the right, even when dealing with a historic subject, to make any changes he desires in the facts, his one check being the preconceptions of the theatrical public of his day. Supported by a passage from Aristotle, Corneille claimed this right even for a writer

⁷ See, for instance, *Anecdotes dramatiques* (1775), pp. 210-211; V. Fournel: *Curiosités théâtrales* (1859), p. 150; P. A. Brun: *Savinien de Cyrano Bergerac*, p. 121. The *Menagiana* does not give the name of the play.

⁸ Brunet lists no such play; nor has the Bibliothèque Nationale any copy of it.

⁹ The passage from the Frères Parfait runs as follows: "... nous croyons que l'Auteur de la *Gazette* . . . peut s'être trompé, & que la *Cléoriste* en question, est la même *Clorise* de Baro, qui avoit paru dès 1631." (*Histoire du Théâtre français*, under date of 1636.)

¹⁰ "Cette pièce (*la Clorise*) . . . fut jouée à l'hôtel de Bourgogne en 1631 & reprise en 1636 & 1637 par les troupes de Bellerose & Montdoré. *La Gazette de France* l'ayant annoncé sous le titre de *Cloreste*, plusieurs auteurs ont attribué par erreur à Baro une pièce de ce nom." *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

of tragedy¹¹; and it has been exercised by all great dramatists. Rostand's audience certainly knew nothing of the date of *la Clorise*, nor could they detect other inaccuracies condemned by Magne.¹² In fact, of the many inaccuracies upon which Magne insists with so much vehemence, there are but two which, judged from the proper point of view, can be considered well-founded: it was perhaps unwise of Rostand to show us two men duelling under the eyes of Richelieu well-known for his repressive measures against this habit; and it is impossible, too, that the credulity of many spectators was strained by hearing of a performance of the *Fourberies de Scapin* at a date when all school children have learned that Molière had not yet returned to Paris from the provinces. Yet it is possible that even this last was not so much of a mistake. Dates are not readily retained; have we not all heard of the speech of a newly inducted Academician who found fault with Molière for not having protested against the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes?

There is another principle of dramatic composition which, far from subjecting the playwright to the domination of history, requires him at times to put into his plays things which he knows to be inaccurate. "Souvent," says Victor Hugo,¹³ "les fables du peuple font la vérité du poète" and in this he is but echoing the idea of others, such as Racine, for instance.¹⁴ It is by the operation of this principle that we find many an anachronism in *Cyrano de Bergerac* of which Rostand was surely conscious.¹⁵ Such for instance is the fifteen sous given as the price of admission to the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1640, due no doubt to the well-known lines

¹¹ See, for instance, in the *Second Discours*: "Si vous me demandez jusqu'où peut s'étendre cette liberté qu'a le poët d'aller contre la vérité . . . il (i. e., ce privilège) doit être plus où moins resserré, selon que les sujets sont plus ou moins connus."

¹² E. g., the exact name of Roxane was Robineau, not Robin; d'Artagnan did not enter the guards till 1644; Cyrano was not an only child; Cyrano probably did not know Ragueneau, etc.

¹³ Preface to *Lucrèce Borgia*. *Oeuvres Complètes*, III, p. 6. 1833.

¹⁴ ". . . ici . . . Andromaque ne connoît point d'autre mari qu'Hector, ni d'autre fils qu'Astyanax. J'ai cru en cela me conformer à l'idée que nous avons maintenant de cette princesse." *Seconde Préface of Andromaque*.

¹⁵ In his letter to Magne already referred to, Rostand writes: "Je suis même certain, si complet que soit votre article, qu'il y en a (des anachronismes) un ou deux que je pourrais vous signaler."

of Boileau's Satire IX.¹⁶ Such, too, is Rostand's picture of Montfleury. In his own day Montfleury was popular and much admired¹⁷ but the only idea of Montfleury held by Rostand's audiences, was that given by Molière in his *Impromptu*; and Rostand has been so true to that picture that, out of Molière's adjective *entripaillé*, he has made a verb *désentripailler*.¹⁸ It is likewise in accord with this same principle that Rostand brings into his play another memory of Molière. Desiring to put before his audience the disorderliness of the old theatres, he translated into action certain lines of the *Fâcheux*.¹⁹ It is on them, amplified by details taken from the *Curiosités théâtrales*, that he bases the behavior of the marquis who interrupts the performance by calling for a chair.

What Rostand did in the case of these details, he also did in the portrayal of the hero of his play. Magne becomes sarcastic when he notes the discrepancies between the character of the real Cyrano and that of the man whom Rostand puts before us. It would be absurd to think, however, that Rostand was not aware of these discrepancies. He had taken a course under Dominic on the poets from 1600 to 1660; and his attention must certainly have been caught by P. A. Brun's book, *Savinien de Cyrano Bergerac*, published only four years before the first performance of his play. If his Cyrano is not historical, it is because he preferred to make him legendary. For his purpose, the true figure revealed by the careful research of Brun, was not as important as the popular figure created by other works with which the spectators were more familiar. And that is his very excellent reason for portraying his hero according to what Magne calls "les ridicules fresques de Gau-

¹⁶ "Un clerc pour quinze sous, sans craindre le holà,
Peut aller au parterre attaquer Attila."

¹⁷ Even as late as 1673 this admiration was echoed in Chappuzeau's *Théâtre françois*, e. g. ". . . le Théâtre n'a guère eu qu'un Montfleury qui s'est rendu Illustre en toutes manières"; and "Nous avons vu depuis peu d'années . . . deux illustre Comédiens, Montfleury et Floridor."

¹⁸ . . . "Que Montfleury s'en aille,
Ou bien je l'essorille et le désentripaille" (*Cyrano*, I, 4).
Cf. "Il faut . . . un roi, morbleu! qui soit entripaillé comme il faut"
(*Impromptu*, sc. 1).

¹⁹ See I, 1, the lines beginning: "Les acteurs commençoient" etc.

thier ou de Lacroix.”²⁰ Rostand needed the confidence of his spectators to make them accept many a detail that was historically accurate; by yielding in some measure to their preconceptions, he, like every other skilful dramatist, forced them into that coöperation between the author and the public without which no play is a play.

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²⁰ As a commentary upon the popular vogue of Cyrano in France, it is interesting to remember the lines written by V. Fournel some thirty years earlier: “. . . il y a quelques années un grand bruit se fit tout à coup autour du nom de Cyrano de Bergerac: . . . Charles Nodier, entre autres, publia sur le mousquetaire exhumé de sa tombe une notice ingénueuse et charmante, qui fit l’effet d’une révélation.” (*La Littérature indépendante*, 2e Edition, 1866, p. 53.)